



Four decades from Kate Smith's career: on radio in 1938, top left; with partner Ted Collins on television's "Kate Smith Hour" in 1952, top right; and below, from left, singing "God Bless America" after 1976 Tournament of Roses Parade in 1960 variety show and with Bob Hope at the 1982 Emmy Awards.



Los Angeles Times

**Singer's 'God Bless America' Stirred Nation**

# Kate Smith, Symbol of Patriotism, Dies

By TED THACKREY JR. Times Staff Writer

Kate Smith, whose ringing rendition of "God Bless America" cheered her countrymen through the darkest days of World War II—and transformed her from a popular singer to a national symbol of joyful patriotism—died Tuesday in Raleigh, N.C.

She was 79 and had been in ill health for a decade.

A spokesman for Raleigh Community Hospital said the singer died of respiratory arrest shortly after she arrived at the hospital's emergency room. Her niece, Susan Andron, said Miss Smith was hospitalized last week after falling at her home.

In addition to Andron she leaves a sister, Helena Steene, and another niece, Kathryn Rodriguez.

Funeral Mass will be said Thursday at Our Lady of Lourdes Catholic Church in Raleigh, and a second Funeral Mass was tentatively scheduled for Saturday at St. Mat-

thew's Cathedral in Washington. Interment will be at Fort Lincoln Cemetery in Washington.

The singer, whose popularity on network radio in the 1930s and '40s was virtually unrivaled, had suffered brain damage during a diabetic coma in 1976, making it difficult for her to walk or talk during later years. Diabetes had also forced amputation of her right leg above the knee last January, and she underwent a mastectomy May 9.

Yet she still had fans.

President Reagan, who appeared with her in the 1943 movie "This Is the Army," awarded her the Medal of Freedom—the nation's highest civilian honor—at a 1982 ceremony in Raleigh and expressed condolences when informed of her death Tuesday.

"America," he said in a written statement, "was indeed God-blessed to have Kate Smith as one

of her daughters. Nancy and I will miss her and extend our deepest sympathy to her family."

Kate Smith had no formal music training ("The voice is a God-given gift. I don't question it and I don't train it. I just use it as I think the Lord intended.") and her personal appearance (early Broadway roles were in comic fat-girl parts) was never a particular asset.

But those who heard her rich, contralto voice were not likely to forget it. More than 700 of her songs made the Hit Parade (a yardstick of popular musical success for the era), including "The Music Goes Round and Round," "The Last Time I Saw Paris," "White Cliffs of Dover" and her theme song, "When the Moon Comes Over the Mountain."

The latter song, which she helped write, was for years her best-known effort and accounted for more than 2 million of the 19

million records she sold.

The theme song was eclipsed, though, by the phenomenal public reaction to "God Bless America," which became for several years a virtual second national anthem and inspired a public relations man to christen the singer, "radio's own Statue of Liberty."

Kathryn Elizabeth Smith was born May 1, 1907 (according to family members and court documents; many reference books identify the year as 1909) in Greenville, Va., the Shenandoah Valley country that would later inspire her theme song.

Her parents took her to church in Washington, D.C., and it was there, she said, that her singing career really began.

"I would stand there beside them, the hymnbook upside down before me, and belt away at the hymns," she recalled. "I was al-

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ways a quick study—let me hear a hymn all the way through a couple of times, and I had the words. So of course, I pretended I could read them and the music out of the book. . . ."

Her family tried to discourage her interest in show business. It was not considered a suitable career for well-bred young southern girls.

But Kate continued to sing at schools and church benefits. She added the Charleston to her act and won numerous contests. And when she was finally persuaded to begin nurse's training, the call of the stage proved too compelling.

At 17, she set out to seek her fortune in New York and, after a few months of predictable disappointments, began to find work filling in for ailing performers at second-rate vaudeville houses.

It was during one of these stand-in appearances that she caught the eye of stage star Eddie Dowling, who signed her for a role in his new musical "Honeymoon Lane."

The part he offered was no boost for the ego: The 5-foot, 10-inch Kate, who already weighed more than 220 pounds, was cast as Tiny Little, a fat girl who was ridiculed by other characters. But the part included a couple of songs, and when the show opened Aug. 29, 1926, in Atlantic City, reviewers were more than kind.

"This youngster," one wrote, "with no stage experience whatever, literally stopped the show."

## Shaking the Rafter

"Honeymoon Lane" ran two years on Broadway, and when it closed, she moved immediately into the road company of "Hit the Deck," which gave her a chance to "shake the rafters" with the syncretized spiritual "Hallelujah."

All the same, when she came back to New York, she found she was still perceived as a fat-girl comedian, and her next appearance

was as a foil for comedian Bert Lahr in "Flying High," where she endured such lines as, "When she sits down, it's like a dirigible coming in for a landing."

Later, she would say she didn't mind.

"Being fat didn't worry me in the least," she told an interviewer in 1957. "It was the problem of making people realize its unimportance that floored me for a while."

But friends knew she wept in her dressing room after many performances, and for a while considered getting out of show business.

## Good Fortune

In 1930, however, she ran into a major stroke of good fortune in the form of Columbia Records representative Ted Collins, who decided to see "Flying High" when he had time to kill after missing his train.

"I went into the theater to relax, stayed to cheer and in a lot of ways I never stopped," he said later.

Collins was impressed by the overweight girl singer, asked to see her backstage and there and then began a relationship that endured until his death in 1964.

"I want you to quit this show," he told her. "You're not just some fat-girl laugh-getter. You're a major star, and I want you to start acting like one. . . ."

He booked her into the Palace, (the country's top vaudeville house) for what turned out to be a record run, and on May 1, 1931, arranged for her to make her debut on network radio.

It wasn't much—just a 15-minute, five-day-a-week broadcast on CBS for which she was paid about 65 cents a minute.

## Special Chord

But the network quickly became aware that the singer's style (she began the show by saying, "Hello, everybody," sang "When the Moon Comes Over the Mountain" and closed with, "Thanks for listening")—a format that would remain throughout her career) and her

voice had touched a special chord.

By 1933, with Collins as her partner and announcer, she was the highest paid woman in network radio (at \$3,000 a week) and played herself in a motion picture called "Hello, Everybody." She also went on nationwide vaudeville tours that increased personal contact with her fans and in 1938, began a second daily radio program called "Kate Smith Speaks," during which she presented homespun philosophy on current events and on matters concerning women, their homes and families.

It was also in 1938 that she first sang "God Bless America"—to an immediate roar of approval.

## Exclusive Right

She arranged with the song's writer, Irving Berlin, for the exclusive right to sing the song on the air, introduced it on her Armistice Eve program and continued to sing it week after week on her shows.

"God Bless America" was later released for use by other performers, and there was for a time a growing movement to make it the national anthem, though this died when Miss Smith publicly turned her back on any such plan.

## TV Program

During World War II, she traveled nearly 520,000 miles to entertain troops and sold a record \$600 million in war bonds in a series of round-the-clock radio appeals. One of these, a 24-hour marathon on Feb. 1, 1944, raised a record \$110 million in pledges.

President Franklin D. Roosevelt paid tribute to her influence on home-front morale when, introducing her to visiting King George VI of England, he said, "This is Kate Smith—this is America."

After the war, her radio show, "Kate Smith Speaks" moved from CBS to the Mutual Broadcasting System, when she accused CBS of "restrictions and censorship" (the network said her sponsor had declined to renew her contract) and

in 1950 she made her debut on television with "The Kate Smith Hour," which was called the first major daytime TV program.

It ran four years while she continued to make radio and television appearances, and in January, 1960 (after losing 90 pounds), she unveiled the prime-time variety show, "The Kate Smith Show," which ran for six months.

She appeared in other movies, TV shows and specials over the years and in 1963 sang before a packed Carnegie Hall, her first full-length concert in front of a paying audience. She also wrote two books—both autobiographies—"Living in a Great Big Way," and "Upon My Lips a Song."

Collins estimated in 1957 that she had already earned about \$35 million.

In the 1960s, she gradually slipped into semiretirement at her home in Lake Placid, N.Y.

## National Llmelight

But in the 1970s, she returned to the national limelight—as an inspiration for a hockey team. The Philadelphia Flyers had discovered they were nearly unbeatable when they substituted Kate Smith's recording of "God Bless America" for the national anthem, and for one crucial playoff game, the Flyers flew her in to sing.

She was in demand again a few years later for the 1976 Bicentennial celebrations, but just before Independence Day she went into a diabetic coma that lasted four months and left her confined to a wheelchair.

Her weight dwindled to about 140 pounds, relatives took over her business affairs (and then quarreled in the courts over control of her estate). Miss Smith, who never married, moved to Raleigh in 1979 but made a special appearance—with Bob Hope pushing her wheelchair—at the 1982 Emmy awards ceremony. She wiped a tear from her eye as the audience joined in singing "God Bless America."